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Local residents engage with OPP officials during town hall meeting held at Grace Tipling

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On Wednesday evening last week, citizens of Shelburne were given the opportunity to ask the OPP questions concerning the provincial force's costing and Billing Model.

The meeting, held in Grace Tipling Hall was attended by approximately 70 people, however a good portion of those were police officers and their families and visitors from Orangeville. Orangeville, as you may know will soon go through it's own OPP costing process. In all ,approximately 50 individuals represented the concerned citizens of Shelburne.

The evening started with a brief presentation and overview by CAO Denyse Morrissey, followed by a lengthy question and answer session.

There was a great deal of emotion in the room on the night, with many of those stepping up to the podium seemingly speaking from the heart. At times, however, the facts did not support some of their arguments.

Discussions surrounding the future of the Shelburne Police Service were always going to be contentious, but this is a necessary step in the Town's future.

To be clear, Shelburne does not have a policing problem, rather, it has an accommodation problem and serious financial obligations that it cannot abrogate for the convenience of maintaining a local police service. There is no question in anyone's mind that the Town's officers are first rate and well liked, however, providing them with a new 10,000 square foot home, in this writer's opinion, is simply not possible for the Town to afford, especially since it would cost taxpayers upwards of $8 million in borrowed money.

To be fair and impartial, Council has hired an independent consultant to evaluate, unemotionally and factually, the pros and cons of dismantling the existing force and changing to an OPP police service. The consultant is charged with looking at every avenue of policing in the town, including, but not limited to, the actual costs, the levels of service, the numbers of officers, their duties, their equipment, compliance with existing provincial laws and regulations and the accuracy and completeness, of each forces respective budgets.

What he is not hired to do, which seems to be misunderstood by some in Town, is to try and explain a complicated and opaque costing process. The costing and both the transition contract and the final OPP contract, are totally straightforward and clear, in both their approach and their language. Once again , the consultant was hired to present a totally accurate and unbiased, non-emotionally obscured, evaluation of the cost of policing in Shelburne, for Council to use in it's deliberations.

The assembled OPP panel answered all the questions in a civil and thorough manner, at times going to great lengths to be certain the questioneer understood the response. This was well received by the attending populace, despite some not being amenable to the answers.

A frequent question concerned response times and another was the costs of service.

The OPP were as clear as possible in each case and especially in the service area. OPP use an ?Integrated Force? policing model and response times are not easily explained. Their officers are mobile and the closest officer to a call is generally the one dispatched. All police calls, are prioritized, including the Shelburne Police, this did not seem to be understood by many in attendance, but regardless , it is standard procedure with any police service. A murder, takes precedence over a fender bender, a home invasion, over a public disturbance and so on. The number of officers on duty also plays a part, however, the OPP felt that existing response times would be maintained, based on these parameters .

As for the costs of service, the OPP tried to explain, over and over, from questioner to questioner , that all their resources are a part of their basic service component of the contract. They police over 300 Ontario communities and this holds true for all of them. The only extras in a contract, or enhancements, are where a specific request that falls outside the billing model, is made. As an example, if Shelburne wanted an officer to only do traffic control, in town, for their entire shift, every day, then that would constitute an Enhancement and be billed over and above the Basic Service. Where most residents, were confused, was regarding the Cost of Service component of the Billing Model. This cost is for actual calls, which involve sending an officer to respond. Things such as, a homicide, a robbery, a physical altercation or any other crime. If you have a high crime environment, that cost goes up. Shelburne is hardly that. Nevertheless, in order not to see wild fluctuations in policing costs, Calls for Service billing is based on a four year average, not on an annual basis. Therefore, if you have a spike in one year, that would increase your costs, that spike is averaged out over the four year analysis, which moderates the cost of the Calls for Service billing.

Teacher Len Guchardi was enlightened on this fact, when he asked about officers in the schools. Currently, work load permitting, a Shelburne officer attends the local High School for 40 minutes daily, at lunch hour. The purpose being to build a rapport with the students and I would assume, watch out for signs of illegal activity, in other words, proactive policing. He wanted to know if this would continue and apparently was convinced that it would not and would cost extra. Ken Kees, the OPP spokesman, assured him that, if this is what Shelburne wanted, this would continue and was considered to be part of Basic Service and most certainly would not cost extra. Detachment Commander, Staff Sergeant Nicol Randall, explained that Dufferin detachment has an officer whose job it is to accommodate just such requests. Mr. Guchardi responded that he did not believe it could be done, to which Constable Kees replied that it was easily done, provided the officer was not required elsewhere. When further questioned about the frequency of this occurring , Kees responded Daily.

Dan Sample asked several questions on the night, including whether or not existing officers were guaranteed a position with the OPP in Dufferin. Constable Kees said no, they would have to apply to the force first. He explained that they would be fast tracked through the process and would also go through a thorough background check before being hired. Assuming, that there are no problems, they would certainly be offered a position . This include all officers, including the administrative officers, like the sergeants. He went on to say that in recent OPP amalgamations, most of the officers were offered position. In Sterling-Rodham, six out of eight, who applied were hired, in Wingham it was six out of six and in Minden, of 24 officers, 18 applied and 13 were offered positions. The other five, all had either criminal convictions or were facing or had faced Police Service Act violations. All applicants must meet OPP hiring standards, which are more rigid than smaller local forces might be.

When asked if OPP officers were certified in CPR, the answer again, was most certainly yes. Dan also asked if it was not a fact that the Detachment Commander received a bonus for reducing overtime in her detachment. Staff Sergeant Randall responded, unequivocally , no! She explained that if an officer is involved in an investigation or incident, at the end of their shift, they automatically complete that prior to signing off that shift.

If multiple officers were involved, it could be presumed that that officer might be able to leave things in another's hands, but since most OPP patrol alone, the officer would simply go into overtime.

Tim Orlando, a local horse breeder, who actually lives in Mulmur, which is policed by the OPP already, was concerned about the number of officers assigned and the level of policing that will be provided. He felt there would be less policing for more money. Currently, there are 15 officers working for the Town and they work in shifts, so not all are on duty at all times. Also, administrative officers are not normally out on the street. During the OPP three year Transitioning Contract, that number will be maintained. When the full time contract is adopted, there will be seven officers assigned to Shelburne Zone Four and the result will be the same number of officers on the street as with Shelburne Police. However, Mayor Mills emphasized, this is not a policing issue, it is an accommodation one. No one on Council is concerned about the quality of current policing practices.

The issue of people skills was brought up by several questioners and the OPP response was that it is an important part of their training and that that training is ongoing. As the diversity and composition of Ontario's populace evolves, so must that of the OPP, in order to remain an effective community police force.

Another issue, was the current Town on-line survey about this issue. One woman, in particular, criticized the questions as being irrelevant and not about policing at all. The Mayor tried to point out that the survey was designed to gage what the Town valued overall and what they are willing to give up to have that. The Town has serious infrastructure issues that must be paid for in the next four years, plus the electorate are asking for more parks and recreation, lower taxes, downtown beautification and other issues. They can't have it all, unless they are willing to see a substantial increase inn their taxes, so what do they really want to have and are they willing to accept the cost?

The ex chair person of the Police Services Board asked if it was not true that the Dufferin Detachment was currently understaffed. Nicol Randall replied that no, it is currently fully staffed and that should OPP take over Shelburne policing, additional officers would be hired.

Next up, was a local news blogger, who asked if Council understood the concept and costs of leasing police services and what will it cost in taxes. Mayor Mills explained that this was not a lease, but a contract and that the answer to the cost projections was in the presentation material and on the OPP website, where people could see the cost per property in every OPP policed community. The argument then voiced was that the number of properties in town, was taken from MPAC data which is out of date by two years and that this would increase the costs. In actual fact, if the OPP were billing based on fewer Properties than existed, this lowers the cost, not increases it.

Ed Crewson, a past Mayor of Shelburne was concerned about traffic control, stating that 50,000 vehicle per weekend pass through Shelburne and that currently SPS provides 18 hours of speed control enforcement on any given weekend. Would the OPP duplicate this? The short answer was yes if that was a concern, then they would address it and it was covered by their FTE's in the transition contract, An FTE, stands for Full Time Equivalent. Mr Crewson then asked about absenteeism and turnover in the detachment. Staff Sergeant Randall replied that there is no issue. The detachment is at full complement and when an officer is ill, he is replaced. There are always the same number of on duty officers.

Dan Sample, who was obviously advocating for the Shelburne Police all evening, despite being the seconder fro the motion to ask for this costing, when he was on Council and voting in favour of it, next ask about the civilian staff of SPS, which included the Auxiliary Officers. The OPP response was that there was room for one administrator in the Transition Contract and that the Dufferin Detachment had just been granted the authority to have their own Auxiliary Force and that the SPS members could certainly apply to become OPP Auxiliary and become trained for that duty.

All in all, the meeting was as expected. Everyone, including the OPP knew this was primarily an emotional issue. Financially, the OPP is a less expensive option, from a policing viewpoint, they are a much better equipped force and they do not require accommodations to be provided. This was not and is not an issue about the quality of the Shelburne Police Service, they are an outstanding community force with a 140 year history of service to the Town. What this is, is a matter of fiscal responsibility to the present and future tax payers of Shelburne. The quality of the policing will not be reduced under the OPP and ultimately, given the facts, this has been proven. The quality of the Town is the issue and saving money on policing, which is the most expensive portion of the Budget, 24% in fact, is a big step towards solving not only the infrastructure concerns but also other issues that face Council, such as our debt levels, which the Province has said are already too high and our reserve levels which are too low. Municipal governments, like any government, do not make money, they are not ? for profit: businesses. What they do, do, is take your money and spend it, hopefully wisely.